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## City Hall aide is 'performance-driven'

By John Canalis, The Report

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"I am really blessed and lucky to be here," says David Gauthier of his City Hall job. Gauthier, who has cerebral palsy, was recommended by the nonprofit Best Buddies program. His duties have included helping organize Mayor Bob Foster's holiday food drive and helping staff prepare for council meetings. (Scott Smeltzer/Staff Photographer)

Finding work when employers are shedding jobs is hard enough.

Imagine job hunting with a developmental disability.

David Gauthier, who has cerebral palsy, says he put his challenges aside, as he has done all his life, when he applied to work for Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster.

"It's a position I want to succeed in," he says. "I want to show that anybody can do it."

The Torrance resident credits Maria Shriver with opening the door to City Hall.

Around the time of her Women's Conference at the Long Beach Convention Center, Shriver encouraged Foster to look at candidates from the nonprofit Best Buddies program, which matches employers with developmentally disabled adults. Her brother, Anthony Kennedy Shriver, founded the organization.

"Maria talked to the mayor," Gauthier, 41, says. "When the (state's) first lady asks you for a favor, you don't turn her down."

The mayor's office contacted the nonprofit organization.

"We depended on the Best Buddies program to find the best candidate," says Stacey Toda, an aide to Foster.

An interview with Gauthier followed. Toda and members of the mayor's staff found Gauthier articulate, polite, professional, organized, positive and eager, but also qualified to do clerical work on the 14th floor.

After the required pre-employment screening,

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the mayor hired Gauthier.

"I have a badge," Gauthier says, proudly showing his City Hall identification, "and free rein of the whole tower."

His corner of the tower is a cubicle near the boss's office.

He works 24 hours a week handling newspaper clips, data entry, a weekly events calendar, mail, phones and the piles of business cards handed to the mayor. He recently helped organize Foster's holiday food drive and helps the mayor's staff prepare for council meetings.

"I am really blessed and lucky to be here," Gauthier says. "I'll never tire of this view. When I go into the conference room, and I see the Queen Mary, it almost takes your breath away."

Foster credits Shriver with having the foresight to ask him to look at hiring someone from Best Buddies.

"I am delighted with his work," Foster says. "It's really, first of all, nice to have someone who is always pleasant. When he's working, he's happy to be around people. He just brings a real terrific energy to work."

"We all tell each other we should be grateful for what we have, but here's someone who really is, and he makes the most of it."

Gauthier has had other jobs - casino cashier, truck driver and warehouse worker - but nothing

like helping the man who, along with nine City Council members, runs the second-biggest city in Los Angeles County.

"I've really grown to love the mayor," he says. "It's so unlike the stereotype (of a) politician. He actually practices what he preaches. He drives an electric car. He drives himself to and from meetings instead of having his personnel do it for him."

Though he is pleased to help someone with disabilities, Foster says the city is getting something in return.

"He's producing," Foster says. "It's not charity. He's performance-driven."

Gauthier says he wants to smash the stereotype that people with cerebral palsy cannot work in white-collar environments. So many of his peers end up toiling in fast-food restaurants, retail stores and warehouses.

There's nothing wrong with those jobs, he says, but people with challenges can do more than what some "normal" people might believe.

That is why Best Buddies strives to place clients in "competitive" work environments, says Amber Coffman, a deputy director at the program's Los Angeles-area office in Culver City.

"We're trying to push the corporate envelope a bit," she says.

The organization has 28 clients working in the L.

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A. area, some at major talent agencies, law firms and corporations.

"Fortunately we get good candidates like David," she says.

Gauthier says he knows Long Beach well. He has been to the annual Grand Prix and, as a teenager, used to attend heavy metal concerts at the Long Beach Arena. (He points out that he also likes classical music.)

Aware of his condition, which is not progressive, he says that he is higher functioning than many people with cerebral palsy, which affects cognition and muscle control.

"I was one of the fortunate ones," Gauthier says. "It could have been a lot worse."

Though the mayor's office is nonpartisan, Foster is one of the better-known Democrats in the state.

Gauthier has political heroes in both parties. His views are partly shaped by how politicians treat the disabled.

He cites Shriver, a Democrat, and her husband, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, as heroes for their commitment to Special Olympics, Best Buddies and other programs.

He says he voted for John McCain because running mate Sarah Palin chose to give birth to, rather than abort, a baby she knew had Down syndrome.

"It's not in their nature to have any meanness," he says of friends with Down syndrome. "There's a lot of fear of (the disabled) in people who are normal."

He then lifts his hands, curls his fingers into quote marks, and says, "normal."

Gauthier knows that he works for a city with a good deal of poverty and social problems but says he sees potential here as long as residents do not give up.

"If you learn one thing from history, everything that's old is new again," he says. "I am sure of that. It will come back to its prominence."

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